CLAIMS

1. A peptide of more than 20 contiguous amino acids derived from the envelope region of HCV-related viruses which binds and recognizes anti-HCV-related virus antibodies.

2. A peptide which binds and recognizes an anti-HCV antibody or an anti-HGV antibody present in a sample of body fluid and which is chosen from the group consisting of the sequences as represented in SEQ ID NOs 1 to 38.

3. A functionally equivalent variant or fragment of a peptide according to claim 2.

4. A peptide according to claims 2 or 3, wherein said anti-HCV antibody present in a sample of body fluid is an anti-HCV-E1 or anti-HCV-E2 antibody.

5 A peptide according to of claims 2 or 3, wherein said anti-HGV antibody present in a sample of body fluid is an anti-HGV-E1 or anti-HGV-E2 antibody.

6. A peptide according to any of claims 1 to 5, wherein said peptide is synthesized chemically.

7. A peptide according to any of claims 1 to 5, wherein said peptide is synthesized using recombinant DNA techniques.

8. A peptide according to any of claims 1 to 7, wherein said peptide is biotinylated or contains cysteine bridges.

9. A combination of peptides according to any of claims 1 to 8.

10. A method for diagnosing exposure to or infection by HCV-related viruses comprising:
-contacting anti-HCV-related virus antibodies within a sample of body fluid with a peptide according to any of claims 1 to 8 or with a combination of peptides according to claim 9,
-determining the binding of anti-HCV-related virus antibodies within a sample of body

fluid with a peptide according to any of claims 1 to 8 or with a combination of peptides according to claim 9.

11. An assay kit for detecting the presence of anti-HCV-related virus antibodies within a sample of body fluid comprising:
-possibly a solid support,
-a peptide according to any of claims 1 to 8 or a combination of peptides according to claim 9,
-appropriate markers which allow to determine the complexes formed between anti-HCV-related virus antibodies within a sample of body fluid with a peptide according to any of claims 1 to 8 or a combination of peptides according to claim 9.

12. A bioassay for identifying compounds which modulate the interaction between a peptide and an anti-HCV-related virus antibody, said bioassay comprising:
-contacting anti-HCV-related virus antibodies with a peptide according to any of claims 1 to 8 or with a combination of peptides according to claim 9,
-determining the binding of anti-HCV-related virus antibodies with a peptide according to any of claims 1 to 8 or with a combination of peptides according to claim 9,
-adding a modulator or a combination of modulators to the contacted anti-HCV-related virus antibodies and a peptide according to any of claims 1 to 8 or with a combination of peptides according to claim 9,
-determining the modulation of binding of anti-HCV-related virus antibodies with a peptide according to any of claims 1 to 8 or with a combination of peptides according to claim 9.

13. A bioassay for identifying compounds which modulate the interaction between a peptide and an anti-HCV-related virus antibody, said bioassay comprising:
-determining the binding of anti-HCV-related virus antibodies with a peptide according to any of claims 1 to 8 or with a combination of peptides according to claim 9,
-contacting a modulator with a peptide according to any of claims 1 to 8 or with a combination of peptides according to claim 9,

-adding anti-HCV-related virus antibodies to the contacted modulator with the peptide according to any of claims 1 to 8 or with a combination of peptides according to claim 9,

-determining the modulation of binding between anti-HCV-related virus antibodies with a peptide according to any of claims 1 to 8 or with a combination of peptides according to claim 9.

14. A method for producing a modulator as defined by claims 12 or 13.

15. A modulator for the interaction between a peptide and an anti-HCV-related virus antibody, wherein said modulator was identified by the method according to claims 12 or 13.

16. A composition containing a modulator or a combination of modulators wherein said modulator or combination of modulators was identified by the method according to claims 12 or 13.

17. A composition comprising a peptide according to any of claims 1 to 8 or a combination of peptides according to claim 9.

18. A plasmid vector comprising a nucleotide sequence encoding a polypeptide according to any of claims 1 to 5 or a modulator according to any of claims 12 to 16, operably linked to transcription regulatory elements.

19. A composition according to any of claims 16 to 18 for vaccinating humans against infection with HCV-related virus or any mutated strain thereof.

20. A composition according to any of claims 16 to18 fortherapeutically treating humans against infection with HCV-related virus or any mutated strain thereof.

21. An antibody, more particularly a monoclonal antibody, characterized in that it specifically

recognizes an HCV-related virus peptide according to any of claims 1 to 9.

22. A method to immunize humans against infection with HCV-related virus or any mutated strain thereof, comprising the use of a peptide according to any of claims 1 to 8 or a combination of peptides according to claim 9.